Terms of Reference
Evaluation of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) System
Sustain Sudan

Background and Context

Sustain Sudan is a market-based agricultural intervention designed to restore food production and stabilize farming systems in Sudan. The project uses existing market networks and engages actors such as agrodealers, financial institutions, and distributors to improve access to agricultural inputs and strengthen farming systems. For more information about the project, visit https://sustainafrica-initiative.org/sustain-sudan/.

The project's aim is that more food is available in Sudan than would be the case in a no-project situation. The evaluation must therefore give attention to whether the MEL system is fit for purpose to collect reliable household-level information on input use and production, and whether it can support a credible estimate of additional food production attributable to the project. In assessing this, the evaluator should start with the project's objectives and indicators, and then work back to data collection, quality control, and analysis arrangements.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this assignment is to conduct an independent evaluation of the Sustain Sudan Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) system. The evaluation will serve two primary, interlinked objectives:

1. To strengthen the MEL system: Provide an independent assessment of the design, implementation, quality, and resilience of the MEL system to identify practical improvements that enhance evidence-informed management and adaptation.
2. To provide a second opinion on MEL products: Independently assess the quality and credibility of key MEL products to verify their fitness for purpose in supporting accountability, learning, and decision-making.

In addition, the evaluation will explicitly assess the extent to which the MEL system is fit for purpose to generate reliable household-level data on input use and agricultural production, and to estimate additional food production compared with a no-project situation. This includes assessing the adequacy of objectives and indicators, data collection methods, quality control, calculation/analysis protocols and the responsibilities and manpower available to collect and analyze such data.

Specific Objectives

The evaluation will achieve the following specific objectives:

A. For System Strengthening:

1. Assess Design and Coherence: Evaluate the internal coherence of the MEL system's design and its alignment with the project's Theory of Change, Results Framework, implementation approach, donor requirements, and learning priorities.
2. Assess Implementation and Practice: Determine the extent to which the MEL system is implemented as designed, including data collection, verification, management, analysis, reporting, feedback, and review processes.

3. Assess System Resilience and Safeguards: Evaluate the system's resilience, conflict sensitivity, ethical safeguards, data protection protocols, and its ability to function under changing security, access, and connectivity conditions.

4. Identify Bottlenecks and Opportunities: Identify system strengths, weaknesses, bottlenecks, root causes, and opportunities for improvement. This includes identifying bottlenecks to collect reliable household-level production data and to estimating additional food production and identifying realistic simplifications or streamlining where needed.

5. Develop an Improvement Roadmap: Produce a prioritized, actionable, and resourced MEL System Improvement Roadmap for the remainder of the project.

6. Assess Fitness for Purpose for Household Level Food Production Measurement. Explicitly assess the extent to which the MEL system can reliably estimate additional food production at household level. This includes reviewing objectives indicators and targets for their adequacy in measuring household input use and production assessing data collection methods sampling strategies frequency and tools for household level data evaluating data quality control and verification processes for household data assessing analysis and calculation protocols for estimating additional food production compared with a no project situation and identifying which information can realistically be collected by which parties and what resource is needed within partners or outsourced.

B. For Second Opinion on MEL Products

1. Assess Data and Indicator Quality: Assess the quality of indicators, measurement approaches, baselines, targets, data sources, disaggregation, and means of verification. This includes an assessment of data quality and evidence of credibility (accuracy, completeness, consistency, reliability, validity, timeliness, traceability, and integrity). This must include specific attention to indicators and data on household input use and production, and to the methods used to calculate or estimate additional food production.
2. Assess Technical Quality of MEL Products: Evaluate the technical and practical quality of a sample of key MEL products, including survey reports, progress reports, beneficiary feedback products, learning products, data quality assessments (DQAs), and conflict monitoring products.
3. Assess Evidence Use and Learning: Assess how MEL evidence is used for management, accountability, risk management, and program adaptation, and determine whether the system generates, communicates, applies, and institutionalizes learning.

Scope of the Assignment

The assessment will cover the MEL system as an end-to-end management and learning mechanism, considering the interaction among people, processes, tools, data, technology, governance, and organizational behavior.

Project MEL Design

The evaluator will be required to assess the following components of the project's MEL design:

- Theory of Change and Results Framework.
- MEL plan and monitoring arrangements.
- Evaluation approach and learning agenda.
- Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) arrangements.
- Performance Indicator Reference Sheets.
- Data sources, data collection methods, means of verification, and data flow arrangements.
- Data quality assurance and verification processes.
- Data management, access, storage, and protection arrangements.
- Roles, responsibilities, review, and decision-making arrangements.
- Planned MEL products and reporting requirements.
- Monitoring of assumptions and conflict-related risks.

Deliverables

Deliverable	Minimum Content	Indicative Timing
1. Inception Report	Evaluation questions; detailed methodology and sampling strategy; data collection tools; data analysis plan; ethics and risk management plan; workplan.	**[Week 2]**
2. Finalized tools and assessment framework	Approved interview guides, product review rubric, evidence tracing template, DQA tools and any quantitative instruments; revised evaluation matrix.	**[Week 2- 3]**
3. Preliminary Findings Presentation	Emerging findings; evidence; strengths; gaps; bottlenecks; issues for validation; emerging recommendations; limitations.	**[Week 5-6]**
4. Draft Evaluation Report	Full findings, analysis, conclusions and draft recommendations, with evidence trail and annexes.	**[Week 7]**
5. MEL System Improvement Roadmap	Prioritized actions linked to findings, responsible actors, timeframes, resources, dependencies, and success measures.	**[Week 7–8]**
6. Final Evaluation Report	Revised after factual and substantive comments while maintaining evaluator independence.	**[Week 8]**
7. Final Presentation	Concise presentation of findings, conclusions, recommendations and improvement priorities.	**[Week 8]**
8. Evaluation data and supporting files	Final instruments, anonymized datasets where applicable, analysis files, evidence/product assessment matrix and other agreed supporting files, subject to data protection restrictions.	**[Final submission]**

Work Plan

Deliverable	Minimum Content	Indicative Timing
1. Contracting and mobilisation	Contracting, kick-off, initial document request, access and security briefing	**[Week 1]**
2. Inception	Desk review, stakeholder mapping, evaluation matrix, methodology, sampling, tools, risk/ethics plan	**[Week 1-2]**
3. Data collection and system assessment	KIIs/consultations, product review, process tracing, evidence tracing, DQA	**[Week 3-5]**
4. Analysis and triangulation	Quantitative/qualitative analyses, product assessment, root-cause analysis, synthesis	**[Week 5-6]**
5. Validation	Preliminary findings presentation and factual validation	**[Week 6]**
6. Reporting	Draft report and improvement roadmap	**[Week 7-8]**
7. Finalization	Review, final report, final presentation and supporting files	**[Week 8]**

The evaluator should propose a detailed workplan and level of effort. The final schedule will be agreed based on access, security, document availability, and stakeholder availability.

Required Qualifications and Experience

An experienced independent evaluation firm should undertake the assignment with demonstrated capacity in MEL system assessment and mixed-methods evaluation.

- Demonstrated experience conducting independent evaluations or MEL system assessments for complex development programs.
- At least 10 years of relevant professional experience in MEL, evaluation or applied research, including substantial experience evaluating MEL systems.
- Advanced degree in monitoring and evaluation, evaluation, development studies, social research, statistics, or related discipline.
- Strong quantitative and qualitative research, data analysis, and synthesis skills.
- Demonstrated experience in data quality assessment and evidence tracing.
- Experience reviewing surveys, progress reports, learning products, and other MEL outputs.

- Demonstrated experience assessing organizational learning, adaptive management and evidence use.
- Experience in fragile, conflict-affected or otherwise access-constrained settings.
- Strong report writing, facilitation, presentation, and stakeholder engagement skills.
- Demonstrated independence, ethical practice, and ability to protect sensitive information.
- Experience in Sudan or comparable contexts is an advantage.
- Experience in agriculture, food systems, market-based programming, digital data systems, or conflict sensitivity is an advantage.
- Demonstrated experience in household survey design and implementation of agricultural production measurement and estimating additional production or impact attribution.
- Experience in assessing and simplifying MEL systems, including identifying realistic data collection approaches and recourse requirements.
- Knowledge of analysis protocols for estimating additional food production such as counterfactual or comparison-based estimation yield and area calculations and explicit treatment of assumptions and uncertainty.

Proposal Submission Requirements

Interested firms or teams should submit a concise technical and financial proposal. The proposal should include:

- A description of the proposed technical approach, methodology, and sampling strategy.
- A proposed workplan and level of effort.
- Team composition, roles, and CVs of key personnel.
- At least two relevant examples of comparable assignments.
- A financial proposal with an itemized budget.
- Confirmation of availability and a declaration of any conflict of interest.

Important

Should you have any questions, please contact procurementkenya@ifdc.org and cc pboro@sustainafrica-initiative.org and kmaraga@sustainafrica-initiative.org.